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The Immutable Entities and Time

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A ʿyan thabita and Time

Ancient thinkers fall, roughly, into two groups. Some are interesting only from an academic point of view, as objects of study for the historian of philosophy. Others, however, remain relevant to modern readers as well. They need to be studied not only as part of the history of human thought but also as contemporary thinkers. Ibn ʿArabī (d.1240) belongs without doubt to this second group.

One of his central concepts is *ʿayn thābita*, which Chittick (1989) translates as "immutable entity", though later (1998) replacing the English equivalent by "fixed entity". [2] Though I see his point in changing the translation, I still prefer to speak of immutable entities, at least in this paper.

The immutable entities are "the nonexistent objects of God's knowledge"[3] with "nonexistent" here referring to the lack of existence within creation, in contrast to existence within God's immutable knowledge. The *a'yān thābita* are specifically the immutable entities of possible – or contingent – things (e.g., Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūhāt* II: 473).[4]

From another viewpoint, the immutable entities are the realities of things found at some time in the cosmos and the loci of manifestation for all the attributes of beauty and majesty and are, thus, in their nature receptive to the effusion of the Divine Names. They belong to the Most Holy Effusion (*al-fayd al-aqdas*) and when God discloses Himself in the cosmos through the Holy Effusion (*al-fayd al-muqaddas*), He makes the immutable entities manifest. [5] In their receptivity, the *a'yān* may be called lower

[5] In their receptivity, the *a'yān* may be called lower mothers, the Names being the higher fathers. Their sons are the possibles when in existence.[6]

The immutable entities do not have external existence (*al-wujūd al-khārijī*). This does not make them ontologically unreal, since their lack of existence only refers to the cosmos and to themselves, not to God. For God, they are the real objects of His eternal knowledge.[7] In their state of nonexistence, the immutable entities lack consciousness of themselves – they are not "found" (*mawjūd*) by themselves – but they still are eminently real. In other words, they exist as objects before existing as subjects.

The main reason why such a concept was needed by Ibn ʻArabī is the unchanging nature of God and His knowledge, combined with the doctrine of His omniscience. If the changes occurring in creation and in time did not equate with something immutable, fixed and unchanging within God's knowledge, one would come to the conclusion that either God is not Omniscient, and did not know what events take place, or that He would not be immutable and unchanging.[8] If He came to know events, either before or after their occurrence, there would be an increase in His knowledge and, thus, in Him as well. This would imply that He had not always been perfect, because with the increase of His knowledge He becomes more perfect than He used to be. Thus, the God of yesterday would be imperfect in comparison to the God of today, and this would go on tomorrow.

Change in creation needs to be counterbalanced by something immutable in God's knowledge. In Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, this unchangeability was attributed to ideas which, in a sense, are eternal archetypes – or blueprints – of all things in the material world. When Neoplatonic thought was combined with monotheism, it was natural to locate the ideas in the mind of the One God. Greek philosophers, however, had no reason to argue for God knowing particulars. An eternal One contemplating universals in his own mind was

enough. This, however, left the One far above the creation – or the emanated world – and such a One was more or less irrelevant to man's wellbeing. How could the One take care of an individual, if His (or, should we say, Its) knowledge was restricted to universals?

For Christianity, and later for Islam, this was a major problem. A personal God whom one should be able to draw close to and to address could not be someone almost autistically curled within himself, contemplating his own mind, not caring about any events in the created world. The concept of *'ayn thābita* was thus a genial answer to this problem.[9]

The *a'yān thābita* are not universals, nor blueprints under each of which a series of individuals would fall. On the contrary, each *'ayn thābita* is individual and particular. For this very reason, the translation "permanent archetype", used, among others, by Izutsu (1983) and criticized by Chittick (1989: 83), should be avoided as it may lead one to think of *a'yān thābita* in terms of Platonic ideas or Jungian archetypes, something common to a series of individuals. For the same reason, it might be wise to avoid using the translation "fixed prototypes", given as an alternative translation in the *Twenty-Nine Pages* (p. 26).[10]

It is also necessary to emphasize that the *'ayn thābita* is not the preliminary state of an entity before it really becomes itself, an existent being. On the contrary, the primary mode of being for an entity is as an *'ayn thābita* in the presence of God, *al-hadra*. Moreover, it never leaves this state – were it to do so, it would, obviously, not be immutable. Its coming into being in external existence does not mean that it would cease, at the same time, to be an immutable entity. It always remains primarily an *'ayn thābita*, and its manifestation as an existent being is secondary. As an existent being it is, in fact, one step further removed from God than in its immutable state as an *'ayn thābita*. Thus, the *a'yān thābita* are also not well described as "latent".[11] It is

only from our limited human viewpoint that earthly existence may seem more real than being an eternal object of God's knowledge.[12]

The crucial point is how, while distinguishing between them, one may combine something immutable and unchanging with something which is subject to mutability and lives in a state of continuous change. Or, in Arabic terms, how one can join the immutable *a'yān* to the ever-changing things, *ashyā'*, in this world of generation and perishing, *'ālam al-kawn wa'l-fasād*.

To solve the problem, we first have to take the concept of time into consideration. When we study the immutable entities in connection with time and temporal sequences, we come across some interesting results which are in line with theories of modern physics.

Let me make it clear, though, that I do not believe that Ibn 'Arabī somehow had foreknowledge of modern physics. It is unworthy to assume that Ibn 'Arabī's value as a thinker would depend on how well his thought can be made to agree with modern physics. As a scientist, Ibn 'Arabī was inferior to Einstein, Heisenberg or Gödel. That is not where his worth lies, but in his lucid mystical thought and philosophy. Yet, there is a striking resemblance between some concepts of modern physics and the immutable entities. For me, this is an interesting example of how similar conclusions may be reached from widely different starting points. It does not make Ibn 'Arabī a scientist but it does show that, sometimes, science is a long and complicated way of proving and showing in detail something that can be intuitively grasped in a more direct, yet at the same time more general and summary, way by our thought – or by divine inspiration, if you will.[13]

Ibn 'Arabī makes it clear that time is "a relation that has no *wujūd* in its entity" (*Futūhāt* III: 546, translated by Chittick 1998: 128). Time is, thus, a relation between events or, in other words, it is the organizing principle of events in a sequence, similar to the alphabet: B comes

after A but before C, just as the year 2005 comes after 2004 but before 2006. Individual moments are points on this line.

Things increase or diminish, but their immutable entities do not, by definition, undergo any change. How could this be? One possible solution lies in seeing time as the fourth dimension – not that Ibn ‘Arabī would have used this term, but that is what his view of time implies. If time is merely an organizing principle, it does not radically differ from the other dimensions.

After Einstein, time is often conceived in physics as the fourth dimension which differs in no essential way from the other three dimensions. Thus conceived, events are only a movement in time in a four-dimensional world. Just as we may change our position in a three-dimensional world by taking a step forward, we also move in time, taking steps into the future, as it were.[14]

Scientists speak of space–time worms. By this, they refer to a thing’s movement in time and space. Thus, when I take an airplane from Helsinki to New York, I leave a worm-like channel in the air, and an observer, able to see the world in a four-dimensional way, would see me as worming my way from Helsinki to New York. Such a space–time worm follows my movements from birth to death.[15]

When I said that the space–time worm follows my movements through space and time, I actually expressed it wrongly. The space–time worm does not follow me. It *is* me, seen four-dimensionally. Let us make this clearer with an example. A two-dimensionally thinking creature would be unable to see any third dimension in me, let us say for example depth and breadth, and would conceive of me as a flat creature, a drawing on paper, as it were. If it followed me with its eyes in the third dimension, it would conceive my successive two-dimensional cross-sections as changes in me. For this creature, the third dimension would look like the organizing principle of “events”, changes. A three-dimensionally thinking

creature, like ourselves, conceives of me as a being having height, breadth and depth. Yet in reality, if we

believe in a four-dimensional world, this picture is as restricted as the two-dimensional one.

Now, in a four-dimensional world temporal change is not real change, it is merely following with one's eyes, or consciousness, the object in the fourth dimension. In a three-dimensional world, one cannot properly say that I *change* when, starting from my feet upward, one looks at my body and finally at my head. There is no change in my person, there is only change in the restricted view, or consciousness, of the observer: for the whole time, I have been three-dimensional, from feet to head. Similarly, a space–time worm does not change in time. It just is. When a baby grows up, the respective space–time worm does not change, just like my feet do not change to become my body when the observer moves his eyes in this dimension because my feet remain my feet and my body was there for the whole time. What has changed is merely the observer's focus. Even when one dies, there is no change. There just is nothing more after a point in time, just as there is nothing more after one comes to my head. I am merely finished in that direction at about the height of six feet. After that, at the height of seven feet, there is no me, just like there will be no me in the direction of time after, let us say, the year 2100. Neither restriction involves change.[16]

An immutable entity may be compared to a space–time worm. The birth of a person and his life until death is an immutable sequence in a four-dimensional world involving no changes – except if we consider the situation three-dimensionally. Thus, it is only our blindness to four-dimensionality that lures us into seeing the sequence as change, and time as something radically different from the other three dimensions. Likewise, an immutable entity is immutable although its manifestations seem to change in time. The original, the immutable entity, is eternally unchanging in God's mind. A thing, *shavī*, is merely a

three-dimensional cross-section of a four-dimensional being, the *'ayn thābita*, as it were.

Another metaphor will make the matter clearer. The apparent change in things in our world is built-in to the immutable entities, which do not suffer any change, just like a video cassette contains a film where people seem to move and change. Yet the video itself undergoes no change. It is only when we choose to watch the video that we seem to perceive an ongoing change, a sequence of events. Yet even at the time of our watching the video, with all the increases and diminishments presented in it, the video and its characters remain immutable and without the slightest change. The change only refers to our perception and consciousness. Or in Islamic language, the treasuries of God are never diminished although we may eternally lift treasures from them.[17]

God is thus watching us, as it were, on His video. The only difference is that we have a consciousness, whereas characters on a video remain ignorant of being watched. [18] It is as though the characters on a video were watching themselves. Something like this seems to be the idea in Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūhāt* II: 587ff. (commenting on *in min shay'illā 'indahū khazā'inuh*, translated by Chittick 1989: 87–8):

The engendered things (*al-kawn*) emerge from an existence, i.e., that which is comprised by these treasuries, to another existence. In other words, they become manifest from these treasuries and to themselves through the light by which their selves are unveiled. In the darkness of the treasuries they had been veiled from the vision of themselves, since they were in the state of their own nonexistence.

In modern terms, one could visualize this through our video metaphor.

While the immutable entities remain eternally in God's knowledge, all created things are distinct from Him – Ibn

‘Arabī was no pantheist, although this charge is routinely thrown in his face by his Sunni critics. Ibn ‘Arabī, commenting on a *hadīth qudsī*, points to a crucial distinction (*Futūhāt* IV: 320, translated by Chittick 1989: 85):

That which is both immutable and existent must be finite, but the immutable is infinite. That which is infinite cannot be qualified by diminishment, since that of it which gains actuality in existence is not diminished from immutability. The reason for this is that the thing in its immutability is identical to the thing in the state of its existence, except that God has clothed it in the robe of existence through Himself. So the existence belongs to God, the Real, while the thing remains in its immutability, neither diminishing nor increasing.

Thus, existence, *wujūd*, or, we might say, temporal existence, is what distinguishes things from their immutable entities and provides the mutable side for these entities, without their – and, consequently, God’s (knowledges) – immutability being compromised.

We might think that the immutable entities are temporally unlimited, since they are located outside of time. Time, however, is a feature belonging to creation and everything within creation is temporally limited. Or, to put it in Akbarian diction, time is “a relation that has no *wujūd* in its entity” and the only absolutely temporally unlimited being is God Himself.

The difference between God and the contingents is that only God is unlimited by time *within* creation, *within* the world of generation and perishing. The things in the world are limited by time. The immutable entities are unrelated to time. They are outside of time, not within it. God, on the other hand, is unlimited by time in the world, too. Thus, the immutable entities are unlimited by time only in the sense that time has no relevance for them. Only God is unlimited by time *in time*. Outside of time, everything is, quite obviously and by definition, unlimited

by time. This unlimitedness arises from the fact that there is no sense in speaking about time outside of the created world. No sequence of events can be arranged where nothing happens.[19]

We might clarify the difference between God and created beings with the following example. Prisoners in a jail are limited by doors and locks. The jailer is unlimited by these, since he has the keys. Those outside of the prison are also, in a sense, unlimited by the doors, but not because they would be able to pass through them, opening the locks, but merely because they have no relation whatsoever to the locks and the doors. Once inside the prison, they would be equally limited by them as the prisoners.

We may also return to our video metaphor. An actor's role in a video is limited to, say, twenty minutes whilst the film is being played. When the cassette remains on the shelf, the film not being shown, his role cannot be measured in time. In a way, he is then unlimited by time (we cannot say that his role consists of so-and-so many minutes) but neither is he playing his role even for a fraction of a second. He remains static and outside of time: time has no relevance for him. Time is irrelevant when the film is not being shown.

God, on the other hand, is the main character of the film, being on stage for the whole time of the film, coming and going throughout the scenes at will. Here, obviously, the metaphor is inadequate. Even the main character would be limited by the script, by the role he played when the movie was being filmed. We might put this into Akbarian language by saying that God has no *'ayn thābita* to limit Him. Thus, He is temporally unlimited both within time and outside of it.

But let us come back to a four-dimensional world. In this world, God is the observer who is able to see the four-dimensional world as such, without reducing it to a set of

three-dimensional cross-sections, or frames, following each other. Thus, He senses all "nows" (*waqt*, *ān*) as a single presence (*der ewige nß* of Master Eckhart). Or we might say that He views all the frames of the film, projected simultaneously on a wall – the Platonic allusion here is accidental, though perhaps not irrelevant. Each and every scene, past, present and future, *is* simultaneously there and He may view them at His pleasure. The past and the future are as present to Him as is the present, or, in other words, the tempora only refer to our human consciousness, not to reality itself. They have no *wujūd* in their entities. "Time" only refers to the sequence of the scenes and involves no changes in the characters. The character "a" in frame x may seem different to our eyes in frame x + 1, but for God both scenes are present at the same time and the immutable character A consists of all occurrences $\{a_x – a_{x+n}\}$.

The immutable entity is the source of the sum total of the occurrences of a character in all frames. It is not the same as the occurrences in the film, projected on a wall. They merely mirror it, as a reflection. They, as the atemporal sum total, are equally immutable as the immutable entity is, but within time, or, in other words, in a three-dimensional world, they seem to be in continuous change and movement.

Things (*ashyā'*) are different from immutable entities. Bringing them into existence (*ījād*) is like running a film. Unshown, the characters remain in a potential state and yearn to be shown.[20] When the film is being shown, the characters start moving and acting, thus receiving a seemingly more concrete, though in no way more real, mode of existence. When Ibn 'Arabī (*Futūhāt* II: 232, cf. Chittick 1989: 204) comments on the famous *hadīth kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan* …,[21] that treasure may be equated to the video which has not been run as yet. The only difference is, again, that the characters in the film do not have a consciousness of their own. In being given existence, the immutable entities "taste" their own reality (cf. Chittick 1989: 86), which the characters in the movie

(cf. Chittick 1989: 80), which the characters in the movie do not do.

Space–time worms belong to the physical world and have no spiritual relevance. The immutable entities, on the contrary, remain in the spiritual world and do not belong to the physical world where they are merely manifested, as films shown in a movie theatre. Ibn ‘Arabī described in his works the otherworldly realities on which the world depends, not primarily the material world and the natural laws governing it.

Yet, in a sense, space–time worms might be said to reflect the complete manifestation of the immutable entities during the time of their earthly existence. The existent thing at a certain point of time is merely a partial manifestation of its *‘ayn thābita*, a cross-section, as it were. In the mereological essentialism of Epicharmus and his followers, it is considered that “what appears to be a single individual is a rapid succession of individuals”,[22] an idea which the Ash’arite doctors later adopted for Islamic theology as the perpetual creation of accidents, and which surfaces in the Akbarian understanding of *khalq jadīd*. In a three-dimensional world, this mereological essentialism disagrees with the idea of one immutable entity but in a four-dimensional world the two concepts are not contradictory. To formalize it, the immutable entity A equals in a three-dimensional world the set $\{a_1 , a_2 , \ldots a_x\}$ where *a* is the manifestation of the immutable entity A at a given moment of time and at each moment it is, or may be thought to be, discontinuous with what was before it.

Ibn ‘Arabī developed the concept of immutable entity to describe spiritual and otherworldly existence. That his ideas happen to coincide with modern physics is interesting, but his value does not depend on this coincidence. However, it tells us much about his powerful insight that a spiritual concept of his can be seen to parallel modern theories of physics which have been arrived at from a completely different point of view

arrived at from a completely different point of view.

Appendix

Translation of the Treatise on the Immutable Entities Attributed to Ibn ʻArabī [23]

[The] treatise, titled *The Immutable Entities*, commenting on the *hadīth* "I was a hidden treasure" by the *shaykh* Muhyiddīn al-A'rābī (*sic!*)

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Know, may God give you success in (doing) what He loves and what pleases Him, that a certain learned man[24] made the following divine *hadīth* (*hadīth qudsī*) most problematic: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation to be known" (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan fa-ahbabtu an u'rafa fa-khalaqtu l-khalqa li-u'raf*). He (also) mentioned that it had been asked from many of our contemporary scholars (*'ulamā'*) but that they could not give a (satisfactory) answer to him.

When I looked at what he had said, God, He is Exalted, inspired me (*alhamanī*) with four answers. I will start by mentioning what (that scholar) has said and then add to that the answers which God, He is Exalted, bestowed (*an'ama*) upon me.

[*Explanation of the problem*][25]

The problem is that hiddenness (*khafā'*) is a relational matter (*min al-umūr an-nisbiyya*), since there must be something hidden and something else from which this is hidden. It is not possible that the one from which something is hidden would be God, He is Exalted, because He is manifest to Himself, knowledgeable of His own Essence (*dhāt*) in eternity *a parte ante* and *a parte*

post (*azalan wa-abadan*). Neither is it possible that it could be the creation, because no creatures existed (*lam yakūnū mawjūdīn*) in eternity *a parte ante* so that God might have been hidden from them. The *hadīth* says: God was and no thing was with Him (*kāna llāhu wa-lam yakun ma'ahu shayī*). Thus, hiddenness necessitates created beings and these are the secondary cause (*sabab*) of hiddenness, not the secondary cause of manifestation. This, however, is the opposite of what the *hadīth* indicates, because on the surface level (*fī zāhirihi*) the *hadīth* indicates that He, He is Exalted, was hidden in eternity *a parte ante* in the absence (*'adam*) of the creation. This was the original question.

[*Solving the problem. The first answer*]

Now I say that an answer to this question may be given in several ways. The first is that what is meant by hiddenness is the nonexistence (*'adam*) of someone knowing Him, other than Himself (*siwāhu*). When He wanted there to be a plurality of knowers of Him, He created the creation. He expressed the nonexistence of a knower by hiddenness as if He had said: I was a mighty (*'azīz*) treasure and a noble (*sharīf*) jewel (*jawhar*) but there was no-one to be aware of Me except for Myself and no-one to know My existence except I. Thus, He used hiddenness in a general sense, meaning that which is necessitated by it, viz. the nonexistence of anyone to know Him. Thus, the meaning (of the *hadīth*) would be: I was a beneficent (*muhsin*) lord and a gracious (*mun'im*) and overflowing (*mufīd*) god but no-one was aware of Me nor knew My perfection and My beauty. Thus, I loved to be known and created the creation in order to be known. This is a sound and unproblematic meaning.

[*The second answer*]

The second answer is that things have two kinds of existence, existence in knowledge (*wujūd 'ilmī*) and external existence (*wujūd khārijī*). The existence in knowledge is what is called immutable entities (*al-a'yān*

ath-thābita) and they are ancient (*qadīma*) and eternal *a parte ante*. The external existence is temporally originated (*muhdath*) and the hiddenness of God, He is Exalted, was in relation to the immutable entities in eternity *a parte ante*, because the immutable entities existed (*mawjūda*) with God but they had no awareness of Him and thus God was hidden in relation to them. When He wanted the immutable entities to know Him, He brought them forth from the existence in knowledge into external existence so that God, He is Exalted, would be known, because one cannot be aware of God, He is Exalted, except through external existence.

[*The third answer*]

The third answer relates to what [al-Jawharī] says in the *Sihāh*,[26] transmitting from al-Aßma'ī: *khafaytu sh-shayīa* ("I hid the thing") means *katamtuhū* ("I concealed it") but *khafaytuhū* also means *azhartuhū* ("I made it visible'"), because this (verb) belongs to the *addād*.[27] Thus, His words "I was a *makhfī* treasure" may be understood to come from *khafā'* in the sense of *zuhūr* "manifestation". Thus, the *hadīth* would mean: I was a treasure manifest to Myself but there was no-one else to know Me except Myself and I loved that someone other than Me would know Me and I created the creation (for this).

[*The fourth answer*]

The fourth answer is that the meaning may (also) be: I was manifest to the extreme (*fī ghāyat az-zuhūr*) (yet at the same time) hidden, as if He had said: My Self was almost hidden from Myself, not to speak of others, because of the extremity of manifestation. Thus, I created the creation as a veil to My manifestation and a curtain on My light so that part of My manifestation would be hidden and the created beings could perceive Me. Do you not know that if one wishes to look at the sun itself, he shadows his eyes with his hand and covers some of its light so that he could perceive another part of its[28] light.

Thus, He created the created beings to be a veil on His light and set this as a secondary cause of His, He is Exalted, being perceived. (He continued:) I loved to be known and created the creation. Praised be He who put manifestation to hinder from perceiving and put the curtain and the veil as a secondary cause of manifestation and perceiving.[29] This is the knowledge of the realities (*al-haqā'iq*).

The tractate entitled *The Immutable Entities* and attributed to the *shaykh* Muhyīddīn Ibn ʻArabī has been completed.

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